# How do I Pray?

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Preacher: The Rt. Revd Mike Hill

[0:00] Before I speak to you, why don't we pray together as we sit, let's bow our heads. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for this amazing gift of prayer.

And Lord, we want to seek your forgiveness for the way in which we have either ignored or abused that gift. And Father, we want to be able to pray like Jesus prayed.
Lord, like the Bible teaches us how to pray. And so Father, we pray now that you give us open ears and open hearts and open minds that we might receive your truth.
And your truth would help us to grow more like Jesus. In his name, Amen. Jesus said this is how you should pray.
Anyway, the philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal said, kind of classic overstatement in a way, but it makes a point.
[1:07] He said, all of humanity's problems stem from an inability to sit quietly in a room alone. Wow. Let me say that again.

All of humanity's problems stem from an inability to sit quietly in a room alone. This year, in Virginia State University, an experiment was carried out with 55 people who were asked to go and sit in a room where there was absolutely nothing.
They were asked to sit there for 15 minutes on their own. And the only thing that there was, was a pedestal with a button on it.
And if you press the button, you got a fairly bad electric shock. So the choice is, you can either do what the researcher Tim Wilson says, and that is sit there doing nothing for just 15 minutes.
Or, if you want to do something, go press the button and do an amazing shock through your ankle.
Now, 67% of men, 67% of men went and pressed the button and took the shock option.
[2:34] 25% of women, yay, 25% of women did the same thing. No wonder there was that book that sold a lot of copies in the 1970s, which is called What Happens When Women Pray.

We're still trying to find out what happens when men pray, obviously. Through the majority of church history, people who were followers of Jesus had this very novel idea.
That trying to live life at high speed was a great enemy of the spiritual life. If you want to live life in the fast lane, if you want to live life in a way that's microwaved, then what you need to know is you will very likely undermine your ability to develop a relationship with God.
Lewis Carroll in Alice in Wonderland has something to say about that. You remember when Alice goes into the domain of the Red Queen.
And she has to run all the time just to stand still. And the Red Queen says to her, Now you see, said the Red Queen, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place.
[4:00] If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that. What a commentary that is on the world in which we live.

Even if you ask retired folks these days, how are you? They'll say, I'm very busy. Of course, there's another side to that.
And the side is that if some people, lots of people live life in the fast track, then there are some people who live life in a way that simply wastes time away.
Daytime television, smartphones, social media, gaming, fooling about online.
Seriously, as much as racing, speeding can make a mess of your relationship with Jesus. Why am I telling you this?
[5:08] Because I don't today want to tell you so much techniques on how to pray. But what I intend to do is to lay some foundations that you need to know about if you are ever going to develop a fertile prayer life.

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I'm not going to give you those smart anachronisms. Some of us do Lectio Divina on a daily basis. Their great acronym is PRAY, P-R-A-Y.
Pause, reflect and rejoice, ask and yield. That's not a bad thing to hold in your mind. Or act, adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication.
I thought I wasn't going to be able to remember that. It's my age. I want to talk to you more about these foundational things.
And I want you to know that if you were to even appropriate 20% of what I say in the next few minutes, your life, the life and ministry of this church, the life of the nation and the life of the world might be changed by God.
[6:29] And if I ask, you know, who wouldn't want that, I don't imagine there'd be too many people sticking their hands up. Church I was minister at.

I had one overriding mission in recruiting people. And that is, if you're not very good, get people around you who are. I had a marvelous team of people at different times.
Every Sunday, there were lots of people in church. Giving was going up through the roof. 75% of our growth as a church was conversion growth. People who'd not known Jesus before.
30 plus home groups, though some of them did little more than go skating together. But in all that, there lay an amazing ministry to me.
Sorry, an amazing mystery to me. And it's this. With all those numbers, with all those gifts, with all those people, our parish prayer meeting weekly could barely muster 30 people.
[7:42] I used to sit and think to myself, what would God do in this place if a few more people showed up? If on the back of only 30, he's doing all this. What if?

What if? And I want you to ask yourself the question. If you started to take prayer more seriously, if you would come to prayer meetings and pray, what if?
What might happen? We had a church weekend once, which a guy who became a bishop called Wallace Ben came and spoke about prayer for a whole weekend at some freezing cold place down in Sussex.
For the next month, our prayer meeting was attended by hundreds of people. Literally. By three months, we were down to about 50 people, and after three months, we were back to the 30 people who came out.
Largely older ladies, many of whom had been in the mission field. Today, in that church, we did six or seven services every Sunday.
[8:56] Today, there is one main service every Sunday, attended by 150 people. See, the life of a church is not just a photograph.

It's a movie. It's a story. And if it's a story that continues on minimal prayer input, then I think it may come to a rather abrupt end.
So here are three things that I want you to take home with you in your hearts today. The first thing is, you have to believe that prayer, individually and together, is important.
There's plenty in the Bible about that. You remember in Acts chapter 4, that critical moment when Peter and John are hauled by the Jewish council in Jerusalem, and they're told, you must not speak in the name of Jesus Christ any longer.
Can you imagine what would have happened if they'd taken any notice? Well, one thing would be, you would not be sitting here today. I don't know what you would be doing, but you would not be in a church on a Sunday, worshipping the living God.
[10:20] So what do the disciples do? Do they decide to form a committee, the anti-persecution committee, with a chairman and a secretary, and hold endless meetings that go nowhere slowly?

No. It said they went back to the believers, and they gathered together in prayer in one voice. You can read that prayer in its entirety in Acts chapter 14.
And at the end of that prayer, we read, the building they were in was shaken, and they all went out and preached the word of God boldly. Let me ask you a question.
Do you think the church today needs a shaking like that? Someone say yes. Yes. Yes. How did that happen?
Because the believers with one voice pray together. Prayer changes things. And if you're ever going to get started on prayer, then the one thing you need to understand is this is a worthwhile endeavor.

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[11:34] This should not just be an optional extra for kind of religious fanatics. but an optional extra. The second thing is, and this is harsh, I'm going to give you a trigger warning at this stage.

Because some of you have had prayers that God didn't answer. And I don't want anybody to leave this church feeling guilty, but here's a point that is really important. It's in Psalm 66 and verse 18. And the psalmist says this, he says, if I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have heard me.
Let me say that again. That's a serious point, isn't it? If I had cherished sin in my heart, cherished it, the Lord would not have heard me.
See, my problem with sin and your problem with sin is, unfortunately, some of it's enjoyable. Wouldn't be a big problem to it. I've never seen that movie, The Exorcist, but somebody told me at one point, the little girl who's supposed to be possessed by the devil, her head's racing around at 360 degrees while she's vomiting bile.
[12:57] Luminous bile. I mean, if that was sin, you wouldn't have a problem avoiding it, would you? No. It's attractive to us.

Gossip is attractive to us. Lust is attractive to us. These things that God says won't do you any good somehow have a lingering appeal to us.
Here's what God says. If you had cherished sin in your heart, the Lord would not have heard you. You see, we go around saying there's no such thing as an unanswered prayer.
And last week, if you were here, you heard a, I think, majestic talk from Russell about why that is and how we should respond when it feels like God doesn't hear us.
If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have heard me. Unconfessed sin, anger, bitterness, impurity will have a negative impact on my ability to pray effectually.
[14:14] The third thing is, prayer is for marathon runners and not for sprinters. So, you remember, there's that very strange story in Luke chapter 11, verses 5 to 8, where the keeper of the house has gone to bed, locked up, turned off all the lights, I guess in their time that was blowing out all the candles, and he'd gone to bed.

At midnight, there's a knock on the door. I mean, who hates that? I was in ministry, you know, there were two things I hated. One was people knocking on the door after 11 p.m. in the evening, and the other was shakily written notes coming through the door at a similar time.
Usually, death threats or something like that. Okay? So, this guy hammers on the door. The owner of the house thinks, I'm going to play dead here.
You know, just keeps going, keeps going, keeps going, keeps going. And then, the moral of this parable is, in the end, the master of the house gets up and does something.
Because he's sick to death of the persistence of the guy hammering on the door. Well, he wants his loaf of bread for crying out loud. Why can't he wait until the shop opened?
[15:50] The message, says Jesus, is that we need to persist in our prayers. Most of the imperatives to pray in the New Testament are in the aorist tense.

That is, they are continuous verbs. That is, pray and go on praying. Not the kind of people who, you know, say, I prayed about that, you know, tick the box, done, finished.
No, we hammer on the door of heaven until God hears us. I love that verse in James chapter 5 where the writer of the epistle says, I can only remember, only ever remember the authorised version.
The effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous man, righteous person in authorised version talk. The effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous man, availeth much.
Wouldn't you like your prayers to avail a bit more? Apparently not. Would you? Yes, of course.
[17:10] Of course you would. And the thing about prayer is we nearly always focus on the outputs. What happened when I prayed?

Did it work? Didn't it work? See, what I'm trying to help you with are the inputs. What are the things that you need to get sorted in your own life before you lock yourself away, says Jesus, on your knees?
Don't babble like the pagans. Don't show up. Don't start praying in the middle of the high street with your arms in the air. I mean, don't let me stop you, but don't do that.
It's the pagans that babble, said Jesus. I mean, it sounds like the pagans pray a lot more than we do. So, I've asked James to put just another short passage of Scripture up on the screen, which is from Mark 11, verses 22 to 26.

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And just very briefly, three things from this passage, which I think are really, really important for us. And the background to what's gone on here is that you remember Jesus is walking along and he goes to pick some fruit from a fig tree.
[18:37] I mean, this is so out of character, isn't it? So, it's a fig tree and the Bible tells us it wasn't even a season for figs. So, Jesus goes to the fig tree and there's no fruit on it.

And gentle Jesus, meek and mild, curses the fig tree. And they're walking past it the next day and Peter, good old Peter, you know, both feet, says, look, Master, the tree you cursed is shriveled. Isn't it amazing that we're amazed when God does what he says he'll do? That's not my point. It's then Jesus, like, goes off on one.
And he starts by saying, have faith in God. Pretty basic in a way. He's teaching them here about how to pray as well.
Have faith in God, he says. And what you need to know is that the Greek syntax of that sentence, see, a lot of preachers put the emphasis on the word faith.
[19:51] But the emphasis in the Greek language is on the word God. The issue is not how big is your faith. No, the issue is how big is your God.

That's why, I think, when praying, we should spend some time praising and magnifying God in our hearts to remind ourselves that this is a big God.
And this big God, Jesus tells us, nothing is impossible for him. Have faith in God.
I've heard of messages in my life where I've gone out of the church with my tail between my legs because I thought I don't have enough faith. What did Jesus say?
If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, go tell this mountain to throw itself into the sea and it will. Do you know how much faith a mustard seed would represent?
[20:59] Truthfully, your faith and my faith. It's not how much faith do you have. Most of us struggle a bit with that. It's how big is your God?

How big is your God? You need to go home and think about that. The second thing about this passage is this. Jesus says all this stuff about making cosmetic changes.
Incidentally, I don't think that Jesus intended us to make cosmetic changes to the universe by rearranging mountains. Mountains in the Bible mostly stand for massive problems.
So Jesus says have faith in God. I tell you the truth. If anyone says this man go to throw yourself into the sea and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him or for her.
Therefore, this passage is loaded with conjunctions. It's a flow of thought. It's not a stream of consciousness. It's a flow of direct thought.
[22:13] And Jesus says therefore, on the basis of what I've just said about your, if you have a big enough God amazing things can happen. Jesus says therefore, I tell you whatever you've asked for in prayer believe that you have received it and it will be yours.

Wow. See, I wonder if together as a church we could start to think like that. Don't think about the size of your faith when I say that to you but think about the size of your God.
Do you? Does anybody in the house believe that with God anything is possible? Nothing is impossible. Anybody believe that? Yes. See, I think that's a decent start.
A decent start. So, believing prayer is important as well as faith in a big God. But the last thing and this, you know what, I wish I didn't have to say this to you.
I really wish I didn't. So, you get faith in a big God, faith released by believing prayer and finally, prayer regulated by forgiveness.
[23:37] So, again, joined up thinking here, verse 25, and when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him so that your Father in Heaven may forgive you your sins.

Seriously? You think of anybody just now in your heart who you find it difficult to forgive?
Maybe you're the kind of person who can't even forgive yourself. Never mind forgive others. See, Jesus says we've got to sort that.
You say, wait a minute, Mike, the person I'm feeling mad about is dead now. So, that's not the point. The point is God wants to know that your heart is right in relation even to that dead person.
some of you have undoubt with issues with parents who are no longer with us. Others of us hold on to stuff year in, year out.
[25:00] We even feed on it, some of us. God says, you want to be an effective prayer?

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Here's the thing, forgive. In Matthew's gospel, there are two really. Matthew says in the Sermon on the Mount, if your brother sins against you, leave your gift at the altar and clear off and go and seek forgiveness.
If your brother sins against you, then in Matthew 18 he says, if you sin against your brother, you still go. I mean, that's asking a lot, isn't it, of people like you and me?
People who somewhere in our soul have a little black book and we keep the names of the people who've crossed us in the past. We have to let go of it, friends. Why? Because Jesus says, that believing prayer is regulated by our willingness to forgive.
Our Father who art in heaven, blah, blah, blah, forgive us our sins as... I thought you'd know it better than that.
[26:19] Yeah. Amazing. So, how to pray? Have faith in God, big God. Secondly, exercise believing prayer.

That is, put into your prayers the idea that with God all things are possible. Nothing is impossible. But please, don't forget that to some extent, the efficaciousness of your prayers will be impacted by your willingness to forgive others.
somebody once said, it's a kind of rewriter of the Beatitudes, blessed are they that expect little for they will not be disappointed. Is that us?
Do we have a vision for revival in Clevedon? Do you have any sense that God wants to work through you to make that happen, through your prayers, through your willingness, as Clive has reminded us to go and invite people?
I wonder how many of you will show up a week tomorrow, that is December the 3rd?
[27:37] 4th. December the 4th, where there will be a prayer meeting for one hour of your life in this building somewhere, might even be in here if enough of you show up.

and don't come because I don't know whether my prayers are up to public exposure. Listen, there will be no pressure on any soul in this church to pray aloud.
I know some of you are terrified by that. Just come along and be there with the people who show up and pray with a heart that says, all things are possible with God.
What do you think might happen? So in my life, just to conclude, I have seen some amazing answers to prayer.
But unfortunately, by my standards, not enough. Okay? I'm going to tell you one. I just told you, you know, my theory in recruitment was if you're no good, get people who are good around you.
[28:48] I had a youth worker, Duncan Dyson was his name. He runs a charity now in Guatemala ministering to street kids. And I learned a lot from Duncan, although he used to row a lot as well, truthfully.

Because I didn't have his faith threshold. It was my problem, not his. Right? So he comes into the staff meeting one morning and says, Mike, we need another full-time member on the youth team. I'm like, well, you've got four people already. He said, well, here's the, gave me the arguments for another staff person. I could see it. I said, look, Duncan, we might be able to scrape together another 30 grand or whatever it was to pay this person, but we're living in South Buckinghamshire. Housing, you can't buy a garage for less than 150 grand. I said, I'm doing, you know, I said, you know, do you have a plan for that? He said, yeah, we'll pray about it.
I'm like, oh, you know, oh. So I smiled sweetly at him and said, yes, of course. Would you like to pray for it, Duncan? Serve you right, you know, him.
[30:05] So he prayed this prayer that was right out, you know, in orbit somewhere above planet Earth and everyone in that room said amen and very few of us meant it.

I said amen, I'm like, yeah, good luck with that, mate, you know. By the way, amen doesn't mean good luck with that. It means so be it.
So we prayed it. That evening, right, that evening, I get a telephone call from a guy called Desmond Waite, sadly dead now, been converted about three months.
He says, Mike, I'm just phoning you up to tell you my dad's died. So I went into defensive mode. I was like, oh my goodness, new Christian, his dad just died, you know, what the heck. So I started to say, well, you know, these days, he said, no, no, no, no, he said, my dad's been ill for a while, he said, I wanted to phone you because he's left me and my brother a house.
[31:15] I'm like, wow, he said, well, it's quite a large house. I'm like, why is he telling me this? He said, it's got 14 bedrooms. I'm like, you sure that's not a hotel?

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He said, then, we're going to sell it and the proceeds are going to be shared between me and my brother. He said, I don't know if you've got any housing needs. But he said, if you want to get a house, buy one up to 350,000.
With God, nothing is impossible. Can we start to believe that together? Yes.
Can we start to pray like we think all things are possible with God? Can we start to believe that in this town where lots of things feel a bit messed up at the moment, that God could become the sovereign Lord of this town that we like to live in called Clevedon?
Those of you living in it. If you live in Portis said, good luck with that. Just kidding. Listen, from today, God's whispering in your ear about any of this stuff.
[32:43] From today, we could start to play our part, not only in our own transformation, I mean, we're all interested in that, aren't we?

You know, millions of books, articles in newspapers every day, you know, go and bury your dog's liver at midnight, you know, at the crossroads, and you start to feel better. I'm not saying all of that stuff's wrong, but we're all interested in stuff, but listen, we need to get a bigger vision.
Town transformation, the transformation of our nation. and its impact on the global world.
Friends, let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for your word, and we're immensely grateful that you encourage us to pray, but Lord, you do put some markers down for us.
Father, we want to pray that you'd open our eyes and give us a refreshed vision of yourself, Lord, that you may become bigger to us in such a way that we can pray in the faith that Jesus spoke about, believing that what we pray for might be received.
[34:12] Lord, we want to pray for those of us who bear grudges of God unforgiveness in our hearts. Would you this morning give us a fresh outpouring of grace that we might be the initiators of seeking forgiveness and reconciliation?

And Lord, as if we needed reminding, we say the Lord's prayer so often in the house together. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lord, pour out your grace, pour out your spirit, that we might be people of peace, people of reconciliation. And Lord, we pray to, for those who sit here uncomfortably, when we read verses like Psalm 66 and verse 18, if I cherish sin in my heart, the Lord would not have heard me.
Lord, help us to come clean before you today. Lord, we pray that you'd hear our prayers now, not because we have any merit, but because we bring them in the name of Jesus, who the Bible tells us sits at your right hand and lives to make intercession for us with God the Father.
Father, we pray these things in the precious name of Jesus. And the people who agreed and wanted to give themselves over to prayer said, Amen.
[35:57] Amen. Thank you.

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